

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF

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before the

**Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation,
Wildlife and Oceans**

Committee on Resources

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am John H. Dunnigan, Executive Director of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. The Commission is comprised of the fifteen Atlantic coastal states, and carries out a diverse array of programs for its members in order to promote and protect Atlantic coastal fisheries through their wise and effective conservation and management. It is a particular pleasure to appear before the Committee today once again to review the tremendous success that the states and their federal partners have achieved in the restoration of one of the grandest marine fisheries anywhere, that of the Atlantic striped bass. As the Committee considers the reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, it can do so in the confidence that its leadership has helped to give the states and the federal agencies the determination to maintain and to build on this outstanding fishery resource conservation success.

We need not remind ourselves again of the sad but important lesson learned the hard way - from years of a declining fishery due to overfishing and habitat degradation; and that could only be solved by years of intense, painful and strict conservation. The coordinated actions of the states and our federal agency partners, and the dedication and sacrifice of fishermen up and down the coast, have yielded stunning results. Under the coordinated management of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), the Atlantic striped bass has made a remarkable recovery from a disastrous stock collapse 20 years ago. The fishery management plan (FMP) implemented and enforced by the states has sought to protect and sustain

spawning populations of this valuable resource throughout its migratory range from North Carolina to Maine. At the same time, the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act has bestowed strength and enforceability on the states' management program, and forged a unique working relationship between the states and their federal conservation partners.

The 20-year Atlantic striped bass recovery is still going strong, even to this day. The striper population is estimated to be 36.5 million fish, which is the largest overall population since the Commission developed the first coast-wide management plan in 1981. This population continues to support the largest recreational fishery along the Atlantic coast, as well as a highly valued commercial fishery. It is true that the 1998 stock assessment indicated that fishing mortality in 1997 and 1998 exceeded the target included in Amendment 5 to the Atlantic Striped Bass FMP. While these fishing mortality estimates raise some concern about how we use our management tools in order to maintain the recovery, the stock is not in any danger of collapse in the near future.

In a continued commitment to ensuring the long-term health of the striped bass resource and the fisheries it supports, the Commission developed Addendum IV to the FMP in 1999 to address the need to achieve the FMP's target fishing mortality levels for the fishery. This Addendum required the states to establish regulations to reduce fishing mortality on large striped bass by 14% for year 2000. Many of the states have implemented more conservative measures for 2000, while others are currently being finalized by the states' legislatures and will be implemented prior to the fishery beginning this spring.

The Commission is beginning the development process for Amendment 6 to the Atlantic Striped Bass FMP, which will address long-term management, science and policy issues. Currently, a public information document is available for public comment through the end of May. Tentatively, Amendment 6 is to be completed in October of this year.

Obviously, the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act has played a major role in fostering the state and federal partnerships that were needed to rebuild the striped bass population. The Act also authorized many of the research and monitoring projects that have collected the data that has been instrumental in the development of effective management programs. The research and monitoring programs developed through this Act need to continue; further striped bass assessment and management would benefit greatly from expanded research on predator/prey relationships, the magnitude and distribution of commercial discards and the further enhancement of critical striped bass habitat. While these authorities are helpful, it is significant to note that federal appropriations have not included any specific funds for the states to carry out programs for Atlantic striped bass for a number of years now. The work that we have been doing for Atlantic striped bass has been carried out under appropriations to support the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, which is the overall program for Atlantic coastal fisheries that is administered by the Commission.

Over the past couple of years, the Commission has been asked to provide a recommendation to the National Marine Fisheries Service regarding opening the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) to striped bass fishing. At this time, there are no specific proposals to open the EEZ or portions of the EEZ pending before the Commission. Therefore, the Commission has not recently provided any recommendation to the federal government. When this issue was last addressed, the Commission's Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board decided to address this question as a part of Amendment 6; and still intends to do so.

Mr. Chairman, the Committee's letter of invitation also indicated your interest in learning more about the statistics and data that support the Atlantic striped bass management program. There can be little doubt that

information supporting the conservation and management of this very valuable resource rank among the best that we have. States carefully monitor commercial quotas. Recreational harvest is monitored through the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey. As good as this data is, we all know it can be better. Significant portions of the recreational fishery, for example, remain unsampled. Fortunately, there is an answer. Over the past few years the states and the federal government have come together in a historic partnership to create a new, unified effort to acquire and manage fisheries data. This is called the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP). This is not a Commission program, although the Commission is certainly a strong participant and supporter. It is a true cooperative, mutual effort by the 23 state and federal agencies that are partners in this unique endeavor. Over the past few years, again using funds under the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, the ACCSP has developed a premier data collection and data management program. What we need now is funding, real funding, if these efforts are to result in changes that we would all like to see - in fact, have to see if fisheries conservation and management is going to do its job. Once again, the Committee is in a position where it has the opportunity to provide leadership to help the states and the federal agencies understand and meet their responsibilities.

I would also like to point out that although the Committee's focus today is on Atlantic striped bass, the funding authorization for the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act is also expiring. The Atlantic coastal states believe that this continues to be a vital program, and indeed takes the success of the Atlantic striped bass program and applies it broadly to the fishery resources of the Atlantic coast. It is also particularly relevant to our discussions today since almost all of the funding the states use to conserve and manage Atlantic striped bass come to us under the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, and not under the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act. There has been some question in the past about whether these really needed to be separate statutes. We believe that this is a fairly minor and procedural distinction that we would be happy to discuss with staff if necessary. Either way, the Atlantic coastal states remain firmly committed to maintaining the Atlantic striped bass recovery; and to the diligent pursuit of the effective conservation and management of all of the valuable fishery resources of the Atlantic coast that they share.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act provided the foundation for the states and federal fishery management agencies to work together to achieve one of the great fishery management success stories. Also, the Act provided a blueprint for the development of the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act. This is perhaps the most successful marine fishery conservation and management statute that Congress ever passed. It is an outstanding example for all environmental and natural resource issues of how much can be accomplished when the states and the federal government, with the leadership of the Congress, come together to work dedicated to their mutual interest.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to try to answer any questions.

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